

Senator Kelly Gebhardt, Chair of the Senate Natural Resources Committee and members of the committee

SENATE BILL NO. 3
DATE Jan. 19, 2009

I submit written testimony for my support of our private timber industry on behalf of the following bills and my families ranching operations. They border National Forest, lease classified forest school trust lands and ownership of classified forested lands that are being affected by the pine beetle infestations. They are affected by the current fire suppression actions by local governments, state and federal agencies; and the increase of the wildland-urban interface areas within the Canyon Creek Community.

The Fire Suppression Interim Committee legislative efforts on fuel reduction based on the health of our private, state and federal forests with the pine beetle epidemic in Montana and other western states can be enhanced by working together. A coordinated wildland fire training program on fuel reduction and reducing fire suppression costs by being more effective with local fire suppression resources is addressed in the following legislative bills.

We all need too work with the private timber and agriculture industries, which are struggling to survive given the state of our national and world economies, which have made the investment in specialized equipment. They have been proven to be another effective "tool of fire suppression and fuel modification resources" among the state and federal agencies on past incidents (Jocko Lakes - 2007) and on site field demonstrations. The effects of the dead and dying forest is and will affect access roads, powerlines and other infrastructure impacting all of us directly or indirectly.

Senate Bill 107 - Require Training on mechanized fuels reduction and fire suppression

I support the efforts of Senator Dave Lewis and the recent amendments to the bill, to work with the Montana Fire Services Training School, and the private industry to enhance the training opportunities with the private contractors. The Montana timber industry strive to diversify during the fire season in protecting Montana natural resources on fire suppression and also to work on fuel reduction projects.

The training requirements that the private contractors must meet established by the state and federal wildland agencies can only be improved through the coordination and collaboration among the private contractors, local governments, state and federal agencies. It best serve's the taxpayer's of the State of Montana, enhances firefighter safety on the fireline, and control large fire suppression costs in the long term.

Senate Bill No. 111 - Clarifying DNRC initial wildland fire attack authority

Senator Rick Ripley efforts to clarify the DNRC initial attack authority enhances the agency to improve upon the initial attack coordination in pre-suppression and suppression planning and initial attack operations. Over the years the state and federal agencies have worked with the local governments (municipal and volunteer fire departments), county commissioners, and county fire wardens, on initial attack agreements, county wildland fire management plans and interagency training of firefighters with the local 911 dispatch centers and interagency dispatch centers.

For the taxpayer and owners of classified forest lands, it is important that the agencies continue too work together on the initial attack operations, on pre-suppression and suppression operations to protect private property, state and federal ownership.

Under (B) (6) The department shall establish and maintain wildland fire control training programs.

I would recommend to the committee and the primary sponsor of the legislative bill to clarify who would be allowed to receive such training in light of SB 107 and SB 113 in regards to current policies under the Northern Rockies Coordinating Group (NRCG). The policies pertain to private contractors and NRCG MOU training providers for private contractors, the relationship of training that is provided within the agency personnel, farmers and ranchers; local governments and federal agencies.

Senate Bill No. 113 – State land Fuel Reduction pilot program

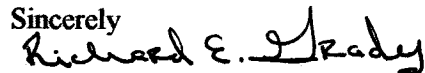
The bill introduced by Senator Jim Keane to establish and implement a private contracting mechanized equipment fuels reduction pilot program on state land. This enhances the cooperative efforts of the state agency and the private sector working together in building working relationships and communications on fuel reduction programs around the wildland-urban interface areas.

The ability to establish a pilot program enhances the work that has been ongoing by the state and federal agencies working with private contractors within our private timber industry. It has involved the education of everyone, private loggers, local government firefighters, state and federal resource manager, fire management line officers, incident management teams, county fire wardens and county commissioners on past field demonstrations.

These field demonstrations have allowed the private timber industry to explain too the state and federal agencies the ability and availability of local specialized timber harvesting equipment such as Excavators, Feller Bunchers, Boom Mounted High Speed Disc Saw, and Harvesters. Some of this equipment has been available on site at various demonstrations involving the work this past summer on state land in the Sieben Ranch area North of Helena, and on March 25, 2003 at a Big Iron workshop in the Missoula Area.

Thank-you for the opportunity to submit written testimony before this committee in support of the above reference legislative bills. They will enhance the lines of communications, collaboration and coordinated efforts among the private timber industry, to work together on the issues with private landowners, local governments, State and federal agencies in the future.

Sincerely



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Cc: Senator Dave Lewis

Senator Rick Ripley

Senator Jim Keane

Attachment: News Article – Billings Gazette – January 16, 2009 – Falling trees, victims of beetle, seen as a problem in US Forest.

Story available at <http://www.billingsgazette.net/articles/2009/01/16/news/wyoming/26-fallingtree.txt>

Published on Friday, January 16, 2009.
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Falling trees, victims of beetle, seen as problem in U.S. forests

By The Associated Press

CHEYENNE - The pine beetle epidemic chewing through forests in Wyoming and Colorado could endanger roads, power lines and other infrastructure as millions of acres of trees fall to the ground, a top U.S. Forest Service official said.

Rocky Mountain regional forester Rick Cables told Wyoming lawmakers Thursday that the threat of falling trees demands that forest managers work to clear trees away from key pieces of infrastructure before it's too late. The fallen trees also provide fuel for forest fires and complicate access for firefighting, he said.

"If you can imagine almost 2 million acres of flat trees - it would be like a wind event or a hurricane came through and just laid the forest flat," Cables said. "And it only takes one tree to close a trail or a road."

Cables said there are more than 3 million acres of dead or dying forests in the two states, including nearly 2 million acres of dead lodgepole pine forest in southern Wyoming and northern Colorado. Lodgepole pines typically fall down seven to 15 years after they die, he said.

The bark beetle epidemic and its effect on regional forests dominated discussion at a briefing on forest health held by the Joint Agriculture, State and Public Lands, and Water Resources committees. Federal and state officials said bark beetles have become a leading factor in forest management since the epidemic was triggered by an extended drought in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

"Right now (the epidemic) is so big there's really nothing you can do to stop it," said Bill Crapser, Wyoming state forester. "So really what we have to focus on now is public safety ... and what we want the future forest to look like and start to position ourselves to move to that."

Cables said he has requested more than \$200 million in emergency funding from the Forest Service for the next three years to address the problem. As part of the project, the Medicine Bow National Forest in southeastern Wyoming is working on an environmental analysis of plans to protect infrastructure from falling trees, he said.

"It's going to be cheaper now than it will be later, because once the trees fall over it's going to be horribly expensive to try to get in and do this work," he said.

Forest managers said Thursday that they see logging and forest fires as key tools for managing Wyoming's existing forests and helping grow healthier forests when new trees sprout in areas devastated by beetles.

Crapser said a viable sawmill industry is critical because the mills create a market for the trees removed from forests, including those killed by beetles. The Wyoming sawmill industry has been struggling in recent years. Mills have closed in Cody and Sheridan, although Intermountain Resources plans to reopen a mill in Saratoga this year.

Nancy Fishering of Intermountain Resources said beetle-killed lodgepole pines are most valuable for wood products if they're harvested from three to five years after the tree dies, but can remain useful for up to 10 years.

Rep. Seth Carson, D-Laramie, questioned the severity of the wildfire risk posed by the increasing acreage of dead trees, which he referred to as the "gas can."

"I'm scared it's going to be the most hellacious fire we've ever seen," Carson said. "It just seems like there'd be no way to control it, just because of the scale."

Forest managers agreed that the prospect of a wildfire in beetle-ravaged forest is frightening. They said they've been working to try to reduce fuels in the forests, create fuel breaks within forests, clear defensible space around structures and increase firefighter training.

Cables said dead trees are particularly hazardous for fire when the needles are red. The risk decreases when the needles fall off because the needles aren't in place to carry a wind-driven fire, he said. But the hazard could be greatest once the trees fall down.

"That is the time, in my mind, that's going to be the very most difficult, because we are going to have real serious questions about putting crews in the middle of some of that country because they won't be able to get out," Cables said.

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